



Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 109th CONGRESS, SECOND SESSION

Vol. 152

WASHINGTON, TUESDAY, JUNE 20, 2006

No. 80

House of Representatives

STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN ED CASE OF HAWAII TUESDAY, JUNE 20, 2006

NURSING RELIEF FOR DISADVANTAGED AREAS REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2005

Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of H.R. 1285, which would amend the Nursing Relief for Disadvantaged Areas Act of 1999 by repealing a provision limiting the nonimmigrant classification for nurses working in health professional shortage areas.

Nursing shortages continue to plague our country, especially our underserved areas like much of my district. A report released by the American Hospital Association (AHA) in April 2006 indicated that U.S. hospitals need approximately 118,000 Registered Nurses (RNs) just to fill current vacant positions. This is, nationwide, a vacancy rate of 8.5 percent. In November 2005, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Monthly Labor Review, stated that more than 1.2 million new and replacement nurses will be needed by 2014. Even worse, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) reported that approximately 30 states had RN shortages in 2000.

In my state of Hawaii, the University of Hawaii (UH) reported in 2000 that we faced a nursing shortage of more than 1,000 registered nurses; this shortage is projected to increase to approximately 2,000 by 2010. Like most states, UH found Hawaii's nursing workforce tired and burnt out due to incredible stress, understaffing issues, and increased overtime without adequate support staff. What is clear from the data already collected coupled with existing information regarding retention is that a worsening shortage of nurses means a worsening shortage of quality care for patients.

These statistics and the trends and conclusions they reflect are nothing new, but what do we do about it? As one valuable initiative, in 1999 President Clinton signed into law P.L. 106-96, the Nursing Relief for Disadvantaged Areas Act. This law provided for foreign nurses to obtain temporary work visas to come to the U.S. and work in places experiencing a shortage of health professionals. By allowing experienced health professionals, particularly nurses, from countries such as the Philippines into medically shortage underserved communities, the law has contributed greatly to keeping hospitals open and, more importantly, providing quality care to patients who otherwise would have no other place to seek treatment.

Mr. Speaker, I fully support the goal of H.R. 1285 to extend this important legislation, the Nursing Relief for Disadvantaged Areas Act of 1999, for an additional three years. I look forward to working with my colleagues on this and other initiatives to ensure that Americans continue to receive the health care they deserve.